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ABSTRACT

Australian aboriginal unemployment stands at somewhere between 45 percent and 80 percent, a situation caused, according to certain observers, by aboriginal attitudes and values regarding work and by educational disadvantage, not by anything in the working environment. According to this view, aborigines are said to be lacking in motivation, to attach little value to work, to be "by nature" noncompetitive, and to show minimal concern for their future well-being. Research contradicts these popular beliefs. Educational disadvantage limits opportunities for employment in white collar and professional jobs and in some circumstances may preclude training, but it should neither limit employment in semiskilled and laboring jobs nor affect opportunities for on-the-job training and apprenticeships. Yet, for aborigines it does both. Research and anecdotal evidence suggest that discrimination is a major contributing factor to aboriginal unemployment. Furthermore, government-sponsored regional employment and training programs, which subsidize employers who train or make provision for training aborigines, have increased aboriginal job placements dramatically and are strong evidence that unemployment is due partially to employers' reluctance to hire aborigines. Aboriginal unemployment, then, must be viewed mainly within the broader context of unequal opportunity in recruitment, training, and work conditions, and not as something done to aborigines by themselves. (CMG)

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AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL UNEMPLOYMENT : IS IT A CASE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL READINESS OR RACISM?*

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ABSTRACT

Possible reasons for the Aboriginal unemployment situation are considered in relation to (a) available psychological research and (b) the effectiveness of regional employment and training programmes in reducing these unemployment figures.

ABORIGINAL UNEMPLOYMENT: IT IT A CASE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL READINESS OR RACISM?

Issues surrounding Aboriginal employment and unemployment are both complex and controversial. While psychologists and educators have expressed their interest in these issues, there is relatively little sound psychological research into this pressing social problem, probably because of its complexity. Briefly, Aboriginal unemployment stands at somewhere between 45 and 80 per cent of the available Aboriginal work force.[1] The actual level of unemployment depends on local situational factors including the seasonality of employment, but probably generally exceeds the official unemployment estimates, due to Aborigines' reluctance to register with unemployment services.[2] Aborigines also tend to find, or be placed in, jobs that are described as unskilled or semi-skilled - the estimates range from 60 to 75 per cent in these categories - and which could be seen as offering negligible returns in terms of prestige or work satisfaction. The complex factors that have precipitated such hardship in this sector of the community are compounded by the differing attitudes that are held by traditional and non-traditional communities towards work generally and the issue of unemployment.[3] This article considers three popularly endorsed factors which, according to various psychologists and educators, contribute to Aboriginal unemployment, and then attempts to assess their actual importance from the research evidence available.

ABORIGINAL ATTITUDES AND VALUES

Some researchers have demonstrated a readiness to seek explanations for Aborigines' poor work records by studying Aboriginal attitudes and values regarding work, rather than by looking for explanations within the work environment. This approach which focusses attention on particular

attitudes or perceived shortcomings of individuals is commonly referred to by psychologists as "blaming the victim". Nevertheless, it seems to be the basis of much organizational development. It also seems to be inherent in articles that discuss Aborigines' work views, including their motivation to work. Here I wish to consider attitudes and values that are seen as part of Aborigines' work consciousness, and to treat as a separate issue later Aborigines' negative attitudes to immediate work encounters.

Some writers have suggested that there are attitudes and values which Aborigines have yet to acquire. They are said to be lacking generally in motivation.[4] Miller says:

> After reaching this age (9-10 years)..... changes in attitude occur, so that interest and effort decline and motivation becomes correspondingly more difficult.....[5]

> Aborigines who are unable to find a regular full-time job whether because of lack of motivation or lack of training, will never become constructive members of a community.....[6]

Rogers, at least, specified the nature of these motivational qualities:

> In the simplest terms the model of a human can be represented by a hierarchy of needs.[7]

> The second restraint...on Aborigines...is... motivation related to satisfaction of (their) basic needs.[8]

Associated with the need satisfaction myth [9] is the belief that Aboriginal society collectively has different value orientations from mainstream Australian society which restrict work involvement. In this regard Aborigines are said to attach little value to work qua work or to financial benefits that come with being employed,[10] to be "by nature" non-competitive,[11] and show minimal concern for their future wellbeing.[12] Because of this, Aborigines are not predisposed to extended work effort. These values, combined with "parents...lack (of) motivation for self-improvement"[13] encourage young Aborigines to "sit down" and often to seek

alternative incomes in the form of unemployment benefits.[14]

Research, on the contrary, does not support these popular beliefs. Aborigines, particularly nontribal communities, have been found to endorse values of individuality, future orientation and assertiveness similar to their Anglo-Australian counterparts, though not always to the same degree.[15] With regard to acceptance of the work concept Eckermann, following research in southern Queensland, has suggested that:

> both men and women believe it important for anyone, who is no longer attending school and not yet of pensionable age or incapacitated, to work. The kind of work done is much less important than that it is steady work and that it brings in regular money..... Work itself is commendable, a person who works is respected, one who does not quickly acquires the reputation of a 'no-hoper'.[16]

This attitude is also found amongst Aborigines in cities[17] and in other rural areas.[18] They too suggest that it is a minority who fit the "no-hoper" stereotype. Here Eckermann's data showing reasons for termination of Aboriginal employment are interesting.[19] They suggest that, amongst males 16-30 years of age, termination occurred mainly because jobs were casual positions or because workers were retrenched rather than because workers chose to leave. Amongst males 30-49 and 50 years and over, better jobs and varied work experience were important in determining voluntary termination of employment. Amongst women, unsatisfactory work conditions, including poor wages, employer attitudes and sexual exploitation, and retrenchment were prominent reasons for termination. These reasons are generally not commensurate with commonly held stereotypes of Aborigines as "bludgers", "no-hopers" or "going walkabout".

Research into job aspirations of Aborigines suggests that children and adults generally aspire to the types of occupations in which they are likely to find themselves. These are mainly unskilled and semiskilled jobs.[20] The level of male aspirations is significantly lower than that

of females. This coincides with reports of greater discrimination against men than women in finding jobs.[21] Allowing for Aborigines' expectations about obtaining low-status jobs, it is difficult to explain an Aboriginal unemployment rate of up to 10 times the general unemployment rate in terms of marginal differences in the extent to which Aborigines and Anglo-Australians endorse certain general attitudes and values. Neither are some writers' accounts of Aborigines' attitudes to school and work consistent with Aborigines' expressed attitudes.

EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

There have been some attempts to link Aborigines' attitudes to work with educational "disadvantage", and with skill specificity.[22] Such disadvantage may produce negative expectations on the part of school leavers - Valadian[23] suggests that the majority of Aboriginal children are forced out of school before they are 15 - and qualifications and skills deficits.[24] Conversely, irregular and insufficient incomes during unemployment have a deletarious effect on home life and children's receptivity to education.[25] Despite an obvious connection between unemployment and level of education, psychologists should strongly resist the suggestion that:

> deficiencies in their background, processes of reasoning, concept formation and comprehension of language.... frustrate or slow down the understanding and learning of the more precise and critical operations vital in any working situation.[26]

Such a statement demonstrates a certain naivety about Aborigines' role in the work force. The underdevelopment of basic educational skills[27] probably limits opportunities for employment in white-collar and professional groups[28] and, in some circumstances, may preclude further training.[29] It should not limit employment in semi-skilled and labouring jobs, and not affect opportunities for on-the-job training and

apprenticeship experiences - whether formal or informal - where such programmes can replace formal educational qualifications. Broom commented that:

> Amount of education makes surprisingly little difference in work force retention, although amount of education affects the number report(ing) as unemployed.[30]

Aborigines, themselves are anxious that there be more opportunities for post-school vocational training.[31] However Broom has suggested that jobs offering broad work experience and an acceptable standard of skills training, and high quality apprenticeship programmes are rarely available to Aborigines. Consequently, the quality of job-based education and lack of employment in skilled positions mean that:

> Aboriginal workers compete in spheres of declining opportunity and their jobs have little skill transfer to other occupations.[32]

Eckermann's study of Aboriginal adults in southern Queensland also highlighted this job immobility.[33]

DISCRIMINATION AND DISADVANTAGE

In summarizing the situation, Broom suggested that Aborigines are disadvantaged in all aspects of work.[34] Research and anecdotal evidence suggest that discrimination is a major contributing factor where there is disadvantage. Larsen, following a study in Townsville, North Queensland, reported that Aborigines were discriminated against by potential employers by either being told that a job was no longer available, being refused an interview, or being told during the interview that they were unsuitable because they were Aboriginal.[35] While psychological tests as selection devices are potentially discriminatory[36] Aborigines, according to Broom's figures, would rarely apply for jobs for which tests would be used. Townsville Aborigines received similar treatment from hotelliers and estate agents. Comparable data detailing discrimination in employment

are available for remote communities like Ceduna,[37] and Norton.[38] Lovejoy also pointed out that refusal of housing prevents Aborigines from seeking certain types of seasonal employment.[39] When Aborigines do gain employment, they often find that salaries and conditions are less than adequate,[40] that demands on them are excessive,[41] or that jobs are boring and meaningless.[42] In addition, better educated Aborigines are often employed in jobs which usually require considerably less education of other Australians.[43]

> In terms of life chances, ...obtaining an education provides no guarantee of finding a high-ranking job.[44]

Aborigines cite discrimination as one of the main problems in obtaining employment.[45] They also see it producing disillusionment and bitterness which, in turn, affect their will to seek work.

There is other strong evidence that unemployment is partially due to employers' reluctance to hire Aborigines. Where the government has sponsored regional employment and training programmes, which are designed to highlight Aboriginal unemployment and to subsidise employers who either train, or make provision for training Aborigines, Aboriginal placements have increased dramatically. Such campaigns have produced results such as 400 per cent increase in placements over the same period for the preceding year at Dubbo, 340 per cent on N.S.W. North Coast[46] and 280 per cent in the Armidale region.[47] A similar campaign has been mounted in Perth. It has been suggested that the campaigns work because they challenge stereotypes of Aborigines as laxy and unreliable using a variety of approaches involving Aborigines.[48] Such a technique was adopted successfully by Larsen in a study to favourably alter student teachers' attitudes to Aborigines.[49] There is some evidence to suggest that they also increase the variety of jobs and apprenticeships available to Aborigines, and encourage unemployed Aborigines to register with the service. For example, in and around Armidale there were 36

per cent more registrations during the campaign than in the same period during the preceding year.[50]

Other factors also contribute to the high unemployment rate amongst Aborigines. Eckermann suggested with regard to the socio-economic climate of country towns, that economic rural recession since the mid-1960s has meant a decline in available station jobs.

> "Aboriginal employment patterns .... are inseparably linked to the general rural economic situation in South-West Queensland."[51]

Furthermore, Aborigines in Rural Town were expected to remain within the economic and industrial roles assigned to them by the Anglo-Australian sector. In tribal communities, with increasing numbers of school leavers, employment problems are exacerbated by the absence of major long-term development schemes and the reluctance of Aborigines to move from tribal regions because of concerns with traditional responsibilities.[52] However, these social, economic and political constraints which may prevent any immediate reduction in Aboriginal unemployment, according to the preceding analysis, must be viewed mainly within the broader context of unequal opportunity in recruitment, training and work conditions. The notion that these constraints are possible results of Aborigines' unwillingness to work should be rejected.

The fact that Aborigines are discriminated against in employment is perhaps best reinforced by an actual instance that was reported in a rural newspaper during one of the C.E.S. campaigns.

> The story is told of an Armidale businessman speaking on the telephone to a CES employment officer, unaware that the officer was aboriginal.
>
> In requesting applicants for a particular job he specified "not to send me any blacks."
>
> Discovering his error later, the businessman is said to have apologised personally and to have placed an aboriginal on his staff.[53]

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8. Rogers op.cit. p.78-79.

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